# Cassandra

I watched the aged Pythia begin the selection ceremony. As the oracle of Delphi and one of the most powerful women in Greece, this decision was imperative. In her youth, the elderly woman had abandoned her name and motherly duties to bear the identity of Apollo's prophetess and high priestess. Now, she was tasked with choosing her successor. Serpents draped her frail shoulders and entwined themselves around her limbs as the Pythia kneeled before the statue of Apollo within the sacred chamber. Two large fissures intersected at the center of the room where she bowed her head and intently listened. Vapors curled upward from within, twisting and twining in a similar fashion to the serpents enveloping the elderly priestess's shoulders. It was through these that Apollo would either approve of the Pythia's decision or state his own claim to a new oracle. A golden circlet coiled around her wrinkled brow, shimmering like starlight. Torches lit the room from distant walls, avoiding intimacy with the fumes. Their glow danced along the perimeter of that sacred space.

I was still a fledgling priestess, new to the ways of Apollo's diviners and handmaidens. I ached to be blessed by Apollo's hand, to wield the knowledge he held, to carry the authority and power he bestowed upon his followers. Sorcery and divination were my true passions; to feel the magic curl about my fingers as I weaved my will into the fabric of the world, to know what wisdom others could only guess at, to hear the songs of the dead in my dreaming moments, all of these were my devotion. I had no interest in marriage. To be loved only for my beauty and the children I would bear fulfilled none of these aspirations. I vehemently denied my father the ability to marry me, the moment I pledged myself to Apollo's Temple. And who can deny the ownership of a god? Not even a king, like my father could.

I had even engaged in an ancient ritual that my older sister, Sophia, had found within the scrolls of her husband's library. A merchant, he was well read and collected even more than he committed to memory. I aimed to gain an elevated gift of prophecy, as to more effectively further my goals. In the secret shadows of the evening, Sophia and I made haste into her husband's orchard. She assisted in the completion of the sublime communion by bringing me food and drink, when I asked of her, keeping watch from a nearby fruit tree. Sophia regularly tested my breathing to be sure the ritual hadn't stolen me away.

Beneath the light of a full harvest moon, I slept abed a sea of serpents as they whispered their secrets in my ears and fondled my soft cheeks with their twisting tongues. Finally, just before the dawn arose, I felt a tingling sensation beginning at the base of my spine and working its way up to my head. I was filled with such warmth and assuredness beyond anything I had ever known. Visions flashed before my eyes in swift succession and overwhelmed me. I began to scream in agony, surely, I was to die, as did Icarus and his waxy wings. I lay there writhing and screaming as a fire burned within my bones and threatened to consume me. Instead, the pain subsided as I began to acclimate rather quickly. Everything seemed louder, more alive. Despite my acclimation, I still needed Sophia to guide me home. My legs felt as if they were being assaulted by needles and upon emerging from the orchard, the two of us were so heavy with exhaustion that we had to be carried into our dwelling by my father's men.

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Now, standing along the wall of Apollo's sacred altar, the flickering lights made me feel as if the statue's eyes were scanning each of us fledgling priestesses for any sort of blemish or misdeed. Who would be worthy of the title, Oracle? Certainly not a novice like myself, yet hope still bloomed in my chest. Perhaps my ambitious venture would be enough to grant me my desire. Even with my newfound gift, I did not know.

The Pythia seemed to whisper and sing along with the snakes as she began to bathe herself in the holy waters that flowed close to the temple. These were known to carry with them the fumes that rose from beneath the chamber. Her melodic voice faded into the ether as she drank deeply from a ritual chalice, resting alongside a matching basin. Finally, she stood and turned to the awaiting procession. The snakes remained wrapped around her body as she hissed my name through squelching gums and collapsed onto the floor in wild convulsions. Not one of us moved to interfere with Apollo's sacred disease. The vipers 'round the woman's body twisted this way and that alongside her, eyes and tongues flickering in the dazzling light. I was unsure how long we had all stood there, waiting for the tremors to pass, but by the parchment lying beside the dying woman, I knew exactly why I had been chosen.

Scribbled in feverish handwriting was the word kalós, beautiful. I had not been chosen for my efforts, nor my devotion, but for my beauty. With the contest won, I felt a churning in my stomach, a wretched feeling of disgrace. Priests entered the chamber and carried the now limp body of the departed Pythia away from my vision. With the elder's soul now eternally united with her faithful god, my journey had only just begun.